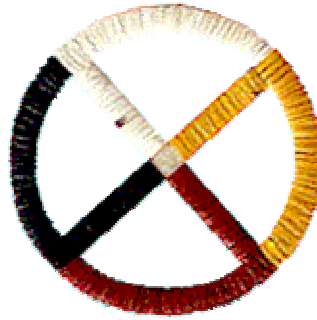


6



A VISION FOR HEALTH – ELIMINATE DISPARITIES AND SUSTAIN WELLBEING

Achieving health and well-being for American Indians and Alaska Natives first requires the elimination of health disparities they have long experienced. This first part of the vision focuses on correcting problems and achieving parity for Indian health by filling in gaps in resources. The second part of the vision goes beyond Indian people having equivalent medical resources and treatment to sustaining well-being by returning to wellness centered Tribal cultural traditions and practices.

Eliminate Health Disparities

National comparisons of health status show that American Indians and Alaska Natives experience major health disparities compared to the health status of the nation as a whole. The RIW endorses the HHS national goals to reduce the rates of disease and death among American Indian and Alaska Native people to levels that equal rates for other Americans. The RIW urges the HHS and the IHS to aggressively pursue the national goals to eliminate health disparities. The special emphasis disparities that are particularly devastating to American Indians and Alaska Natives are:¹⁴

- **Diabetes**
- **Unintentional injuries**
- **Suicide and violence**
- **Alcoholism and substance abuse**
- **Life Expectancy**

Figure 6.1, Top Priorities

Common threads link the experience and causes of health disparities among all racial and ethnic minorities. A coordinated approach by the HHS to address the common root causes of disparities can be beneficial. However, there are more than 550 Tribes, each with a unique history, culture, and distinctive problems and circumstances. To be successful in eliminating disparities, programs must account for the distinctive circumstances of each Tribe and Indian community. The RIW urges HHS to include Tribal communities in designing programs to address their local needs.

Eliminating the health status disparities of American Indians and Alaska Natives begins with addressing the disparities in resources and health care services available to them. Theoretically, all members of federally recognized Tribes are eligible for federal health care services. However, what they get is better described as rationed health care. Life-threatening conditions get first priority, and if money is exhausted before the end of the fiscal year, as it often is, patients with lesser problems find their medical care postponed or simply not available. The gap in resources and services severely restricts health care services to American Indians and Alaska Natives and is one root cause of the failure to eliminate unacceptable rates of death and disease among Indians. Gaps in resources, access to, and use of health care services by Indian people is demonstrated with the following statistics:

- Only 22 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives have employer-sponsored health insurance compared to 70 percent of all Americans (one reason is the extremely high unemployment rate on many Indian reservations). Forty-two percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives do not have health care insurance.
- The percentage of Indian elders with Medicare benefits (7 percent) is half the rate of other elderly Americans (13 percent).
- Despite having household incomes that are among the lowest, American Indians and Alaska Natives are enrolled in state Medicaid programs at a lower rate (34 percent) than other poor Americans (41 percent).
- The number of physicians per 100,000 population in Indian Country is 73.5 compared to the U.S. average of 229.3.
- The IHS can serve (incompletely) only 1.4 million of the 2.5 million American Indians and Alaska Natives living in the United States identified by the census data.
- The IHS expenditures for personal health care services was approximately \$1,775 per capita in 2001 compared to \$4,392 per capita for all Americans.
- A 1999 actuarial study found funding per IHS user was less than 60 percent of the cost of coverage in mainstream insurance plans such as the Federal Employee Health Benefit Plan.
- More than half of IHS and Tribal hospitals and clinics are more than 35 years old. The backlog to correct IHS and Tribal facilities deficiencies is estimated at \$1.6 billion.

Fill-In Resource Gaps

To effectively meet health care needs of Indian people, the RIW vision is to achieve parity in health care services and resources by 2007. To achieve this vision, the RIW recommends:

- 6.1 Double IHS funding on a per capita basis to bring resources for Indian health in line with those available to other Americans.
- 6.2 Ensure eligibility for Tribes and urban Indian health organizations to access and share in health care resources of other HHS agencies.
- 6.3 Double the number health care providers in the Indian health care system.
- 6.4 Eliminate shortages of doctors, dentists, pharmacists, nurses and other health care providers in Indian Country through better recruitment, training, and compensation.
- 6.5 Replace, expand, and modernize aged inadequate hospitals and ambulatory clinics for a growing Indian population.
- 6.6 Invest in community infrastructure, especially for safe water supply and waste disposal—forms infrastructure that are virtually non-existent in remote areas of Indian Country.

The RIW supports aggressive action by the federal government to eliminate the unacceptable health disparities experienced by Indian people. However, the vision for sustained health and well-being of Indian people goes beyond having equivalent access to medical resources and treatment.

Sustained Well-Being Founded in Indian Cultural Traditions

Indian cultural beliefs and traditional Indian medicine arouse curiosity perhaps more than any other aspect of American Indian life. While beliefs, ceremonies, and rituals differ from Tribe to Tribe, many Tribes share an underlying belief that the natural or correct state of all things is harmony. Tribal beliefs, traditions, and customs handed down through many generations play a principal role in individual and collective Indian identity. American Indians and Alaska Natives strive to integrate closely within the family, clan, and Tribe and to live in harmony with the environment. This occurs simultaneously on physical, mental, and spiritual levels. For American Indians and Alaska Natives, wellness is a state of harmony and balance among mind, body, spirit, and the earth.

The traditional Tribal healing practices are of great value to Indian patients for restoring and sustaining health and well-being. Many Indian patients and their families consult with Tribal healers or practitioners. The IHS' Traditional Medicine Initiative emphasizes the alliance of traditional and western medical practices and the mutual support between community traditional healers and IHS health care providers. Through this initiative, the IHS seeks to foster formal relationships between local service delivery points and traditional healers so that cultural principles, beliefs, traditional healing practices are respected and affirmed by the IHS as an integral component of the healing process.

Wellness, Behavior, and Lifestyles

The role of traditional Tribal healers is more widely accepted now, especially as Tribal health care programs attempt to address serious health problems such as diabetes, alcoholism, substance abuse, and violence which are not easily remedied by modern medical practice. The role of traditional Tribal healing and other cultural beliefs and practices is especially important in health promotion because the concept of health for most Tribes is wellness-centered and enforced by social rules of behavior intended to help prevent illness and misfortune. Personal choices in diet, exercise, tobacco use, and alcohol consumption help determine health and well-being. Promoting healthy lifestyles means mobilizing American Indians and Alaska Native communities to return to wellness-centered traditions and practices.

The Link between Heritage and Health

Some of the most serious health problems afflicting Indian people have deep roots in poverty, cultural dislocation, and unhealthy lifestyles. This is where the vision for sustainable wellness comes in. Our vision for sustained well-being is founded on the re-enforcement of Tribal cultural principles and practices integrated with an adequately resourced medical system. Sustainability depends on combining the uniqueness of American Indians and Alaska Natives with the historic obligation of the U.S. Government to Tribes based on treaties and a big-picture approach to health and well-being shaped by Indian principles of family, clan, community, Tribe, and balanced living and harmony with the environment. The link between heritage and health is symbolized in the circle of life shown below.

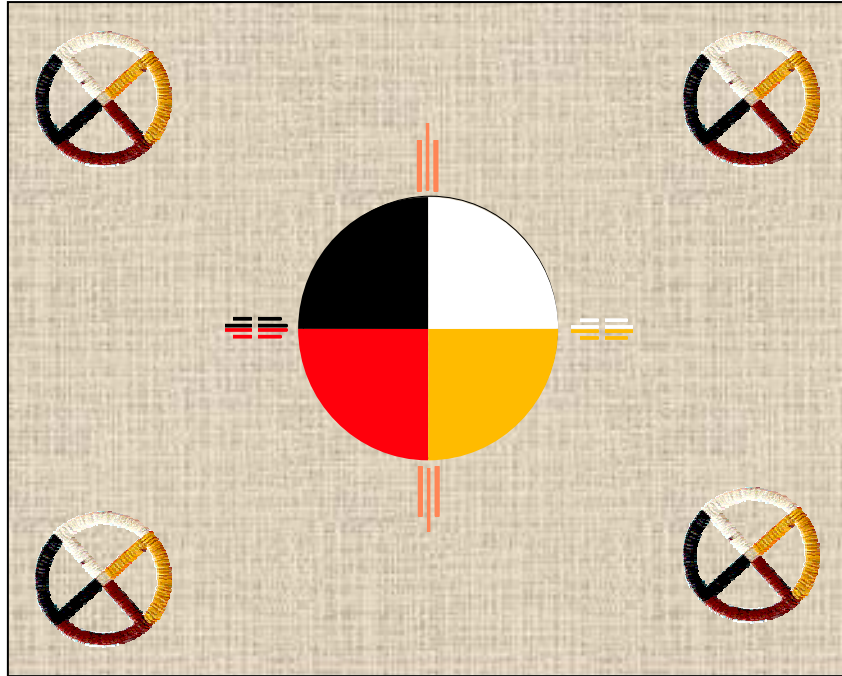


Figure 6.2, Circle of Life Symbol or Medicine Wheel¹⁵

Strategies to Sustain Health and Well-Being

The RIW vision for sustainable health and importance of heritage and spiritual practices accords with the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative. The President's initiative welcomes the participation of faith-based and community-based organizations as valued and essential partners in assisting Americans in need. The Initiative identifies faith-based and community caregivers as those who are close to those in need and trusted by those who hurt. Tribal traditional healers fit this description.

By working in partnership with Tribes, Native communities, and the American Indian and Alaska Native people, the Indian health care system can help sustain health and well-being for American Indian and Alaska Native people by following strategies to:

- 6.7 Encourage and support traditional Tribal healers, cultural practices and principles;
- 6.8 Emphasize Indian beliefs, ceremonies, and traditional practices of harmony and health as grounding for individual identity and personal self-worth — especially for young people;
- 6.9 Devote appropriate resources to wellness and prevention programs targeted to lifestyle including diet, exercise, and the avoidance of risky behaviors;
- 6.10 Recognize the whole person, extending to family, clan, Tribe, economic, and spiritual elements;
- 6.11 Reinforce Tribal values that encourage healthy choices and discourage harmful activities;
- 6.12 Support Tribal governance and infrastructure to provide a stable basis for community and individual development;
- 6.13 Build a viable economic base for employment in Indian communities, sustainable income, and means for self-support;
- 6.14 Renew a healthy environment, in conjunction with other Federal agencies, by correcting environmental damage (toxic waste, dioxins in rivers, etc.) and preserving opportunities for hunting, fishing, and gathering from the land, rivers, and seas much as Indian people have done for thousands of years.